

Romans 14:19
So then let us
follow after things
which make for
peace, and things
whereby we may
edify one another.



John 8:32 and
ye shall know
the truth, and
the truth shall
make you free.

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SHORTENING THE “ETERNITY” OF “ETERNAL PUNISHMENT”

Jim Everett

This is the fifth article in a series of seven articles on the eternal nature of condemnation and punishment by Jim Everett.

By what reasoning process do the opponents of “*eternal punishment*” seek to diminish the time-frame reference so that “eternity” is not a quantitative qualification of endless duration? The observations here are not designed to be exhaustive of all the arguments but, rather, are an examination of the most common ones that are considered to be the most persuasive. The answers in this section are summations and objections to the basic fallacies involved in their arguments.

(1) Some opponents of hell say: “*The adjectival use of ‘aionios’ can never mean more than the noun use of ‘aion.’ Therefore, since ‘aion’ means ‘age,’ then ‘aionios’ must mean nothing more than ‘age lasting.’*” The fallacy of that statement can be seen by examining contexts containing the words “eternal” and “forever.” It cannot be successfully denied by the opponents of an “eternal hell” that the words “eternal” and “everlasting,” as they apply to God, convey “endless duration” — the evidence is there; they have no choice — **Rom 1:25, 9:5, 11:36; 16:27; Eph 3:21** — cf. **Heb 13:8**. Would they dare affirm that God is just an “age lasting” God? Furthermore, the passages that describe the existence of the righteous in the resurrection use the word “aionios” to describe an eternal time frame reference — **Matt 19:29; 25:46; Lk 16:9; Rom 2:7; Tit 1:1; Heb 5:9; 2 Cor 5:1**. To believe in both the eternal nature of God and

the “endless duration” of the future of the righteous means that one must accept the fact that “aionios” does, indeed, mean more than the noun usage of “aion.” Therefore, “aionios” (endless duration) can also describe the future existence of the wicked. It is not a more accurate definition of the word, “aionios,” that causes one to deny “everlasting punishment.” The argument, as stated in the beginning of this paragraph, is blatantly false.

(2) Others seek to “water down hell” by arguing that the fire of hell is eternal but the resurrected evil are burned up immediately by the fire. That necessarily recognizes the “endless duration” sense of “aionios” as descriptive of the fire. But the most logical question that comes to mind is, “Why have an eternal fire, if it accomplished in an instant the punishment of the wicked in burning up their bodies?” So, a second explanation is offered that is slightly different and is designed to address that problem — “*The fire is called eternal, because it has eternal consequences but the fire only lasted as long as it took to consume evil men.*” John Stott said, “*The fire itself is termed ‘eternal’ and ‘unquenchable,’ but it would be very odd if what is thrown into it proves indestructible. Our expectation would be the opposite: it would be consumed forever, not tormented forever. Hence it is the smoke (evidence that the fire has done its work) which ‘rises for ever and ever’ (Rev. 14:11; cf. 19:3).*” This little bit of sophistry throws muddy water on hell by its materialism — so now the fire is not eternal but the

smoke is eternal evidence of the destruction of the evil — evidence for whom and for what reason? God did it, so He surely knows about it and why He did it. The unrighteous are supposedly eternally gone, so there are no evil people around for whom the smoke will serve as a warning. The righteous are in a totally different existence, where there is no evil so they don't need to know. Furthermore, Stott's answer ignores the rest of verse **11 in chapter 4** — *“...and they have no rest day nor night, who worship the beast and his image, and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name.”* Also, **v. 10**, affirms that anyone who worships the beast will drink of the wine of the wrath of God, *“and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the lamb.”* If the evil souls cease to exist because they are separated from God's presence, that contradicts what John says here — he says they are tormented in the presence of the Lamb. Their explanation is not only nonsensical, it plainly contradicts what the passage, in its entirety, says.

(3) Notice this subtle play on words — *“But Jesus did not say ‘eternal punishing’ — He said, ‘eternal punishment.’ ‘Eternal punishment’ would mean ‘annihilation,’ because its results would be for eternity.”* Jesus did not have to employ the participle “punishing” in order to convey a continued, ongoing punishment. For instance, when Cain said to God, *“My punishment is greater than I can bear...”* (**Gen 4:13**), he referred to God's curse placed upon him (**vv. 11-12**). As long as he lived, the punishment continued. Cain could have said the same thing by using a verbal expression — “My being punished is too great.” The prepositional phrase *“...into everlasting punishment”* carries the same connotation as “being punished forever,” just as a person might be sent into banishment would mean that he was being banished and would continue being banished for the whole duration of time. It is significant that the quantitative qualification of the punishment Jesus described is *“eternal”* — it is not just death — the punishment endures eternally.

(4) Jude said, *“Even as Sodom and Gomorrah... are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire.”* The efforts put forth by those who believe in “conditional immortality” and “annihilation” from **Jude 7** argue that Jude used the word *“eternal”* to qualify punishment by fire for a period of time that was of the few minutes or hours that God rained the fire and brimstone on the cities and they were destroyed. They affirm that since Sodom and Gomorrah suffered the vengeance of *“eternal fire”* and it was the annihilation of the cities, then the “eternal punishment” of the wicked at the final judgment will also be annihilation. In this way, they

say that *“eternal fire”* is called that because it has “eternal consequences” in “annihilation” rather than an “ongoing punishment.” There appears to me to be, first, a certain anomaly in that position. On the one hand they argue for *“the vengeance of eternal fire”* being the destruction of the cities that took place in just a few minutes. On the other hand, they affirm that the unrighteous will be raised to suffer *“eternal punishment”* when their resurrected bodies are forever annihilated. But, if it was *“eternal punishment”* when fire and brimstone consumed them, then how can it be *“eternal punishment”* at their resurrection?

Another thing that seems strange to me about that interpretation would be the use of *“eternal”* as it applies to fire since, according to them, even a temporary fire would accomplish the same thing. And, if these inhabitants were annihilated when the fire and brimstone fell on the cities, that fire could just as appropriately be called “momentary” fire instead of *“eternal”* fire — they would become just as nonexistent by a “momentary” fire as they would by an *“eternal”* fire — the consequences are the same. In the context and in a comparison of a similar account by Peter (**2 Pet 2:6-9**), I do not believe the *“eternal fire”* describes the physical fire and brimstone that fell upon the cities. The fire and brimstone that destroyed the cities of the plains is not called *“eternal fire”* — the sulfurous rain from heaven destroyed the cities and left them as a sign of the eternal doom. Jude's illustration serves as a type that includes the righteous vengeance of God in *“everlasting punishment.”* The word *“example”* (Greek “deigma” — specimen, pattern) lends credence to that idea. The verb form “deigmatizo” is found in **Matt 1:19**; **Heb 6:6**, and **Col 2:15**. The intensified “hupodeigma” is found in **2 Pet 2:6**. In the immediate context, **v. 6** certainly reaches beyond our physical world in anticipation of eternal, existence consequences. *“Undergoing the vengeance of eternal fire”* goes beyond what happened on the day that God rained fire and brimstone on the cities of the plains - their eternal doom was sealed on the very day of their destruction. Of those inhabitants, Jude could appropriately use the destructive fire as an example of their eternal expectations.

In Peter's similar account of God's righteous judgments on the ungodly (**2 Pet 2:6-9**), he draws this conclusion: *“The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations, and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished,”* (**v. 9**). Literally, the text reads, *“...but to keep unjust men being punished for a day of judgment”* — *“BEING PUNISHED”* — the very participial form that the annihilationist says cannot be true. For however long, from whatever time frame Peter wrote, these

unrighteous are *"being punished"* in some form. *"Being punished"* cannot convey annihilation or a state of "non-existence."

And to the "conditional immortalist" we would say that the disobedient angels who are shut up, the unfaithful Israelites, the worldly of Noah's day and the homosexuals of Sodom and Gomorrah continue their existence. Though they are separated from a relationship with God they are *"kept"* by Him. Or being facetious, we might ask, "Perhaps, after thousands of years, they are at this very moment cooling into nothingness as a coal that is separated from the fire of its life?" Pray tell us, "How long does it take for the soul created in God's likeness, when separated from God's presence, to fade into non-existence?"

(5) Also, an argument is made based on the fact that chaff, tares and branches are to be *"burned up,"* (**Matt 13:30; 40; Jno 15:6**). This, they say, cannot refer to eternal, conscious punishment, because *"burned up"* means "annihilated." Their conclusion is that we must interpret "eternal punishment" by "eternal fire" as meaning "consumed" and "annihilated." But words must be used consistent within the figure of which they are a part. *"Burned up"* is consistent with the tares, chaff or branches. Jesus could not consistently have said that the tares or chaff would be punished with "everlasting punishment." That would not fit the figures. Whenever a figure is employed in scripture, there must be consistency within the figure. Then when the figure is understood, straightforward conclusions can be drawn and lessons applied from the figures. Their reasoning is fallacious in that it makes the figures of speech employed by Jesus serve as the greater force in interpreting the duration of punishment rather than the straight forward explanation given or the applications drawn from the figures.

(6) Another procedure of diminishing the time frame reference of "eternal duration punishment" is to affirm that "eternal punishment" is said to be a time when souls are "destroyed." Jesus said that God has power to destroy the soul (**Matt 10:28**). And, if man's soul is destroyed, eternal punishment would be the burning up of the bodies of the unrighteous after their resurrection. But the Greek word "apollumi" does not mean annihilation — it is never so translated and does not convey that thought. Note Vine, pp. 304-306; Thayer, pp. 64-65. Compare **2 Thess 1:9** — *"Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power."* Its meaning is *"loss of well being,"* not loss of being.

REASONING IN ANTITHETICAL FORM — In an antithesis one can conceive of the lucidness of a truth on one side by coming to a knowledge of the

force of the other side. (note Dungan, pp. 346-348). For instance, in **Matthew 25:46**, the phrases *"eternal life"* and *"eternal punishment"* are used as opposites with both *"life"* and *"punishment"* quantitatively qualified by *"eternal."* Therefore, if one can conceive of the duration described by *"eternal life"* as promised by God as endless, then he is forced to accept that the threatened *"eternal punishment"* has the same duration, since the word *"eternal"* gives quantitative qualification to both. Since the word "aionios" is used in the N.T. to designate the duration of eternal happiness, and also to describe the continuance of the future misery of the wicked, by which rule of interpreting language can we possibly avoid the conclusion that the words have the same sense in both instances? I would say, that if the scriptures do not affirm the endless duration of the punishment of the wicked, neither do they affirm the endless duration of the happiness of the righteous nor the endless duration of the nature of God! And that is the reason that I said that if those believing in "conditional immortality" reason consistently, they will eventually deny the endless duration of heaven and the "Eternal God," Himself.

Jim R. Everett taken from insearchoftruth.org

One day, when Vice President Calvin Coolidge was presiding over the Senate, one Senator angrily told another to go "straight to hell". The offended Senator complained to Coolidge as presiding officer, and Cal looked up from the book he had been leafing through while listening to the debate. "I've been looking through the rule book," he said. "you don't have to go."

Crossroads, Issue No. 7, p. 16.

A new believer was on a plane with an intellectual (a man educated beyond his intelligence). He sneered at her reading the Bible. Asked if she believed it? "Yes." "Jonah and the whale story?" "Yes." "How did it happen?" "Don't know, but I'll find out when I get to heaven." "What if Jonah isn't there?" "Then I guess you'll have to ask him for me."

Source Unknown.

The safest road to hell is the gradual one--the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.

C.S. Lewis.

Psalm 1:1 *Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the wicked, Nor standeth in the way of sinners, Nor sitteth in the seat of scoffers: 2 But his delight is in the law of Jehovah; And on his law doth he meditate day and night. 3 And he shall be like a tree planted by the streams of water, That bringeth forth its fruit in its season, Whose leaf also doth not wither; And whatsoever he doeth shall prosper. 4 The wicked are not so, But are like the chaff which the wind driveth away. 5 Therefore the wicked shall not stand in the judgment, Nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous. 6 For Jehovah knoweth the way of the righteous; But the way of the wicked shall perish.*

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What Must I Do To Be Saved?

Hear the gospel - Romans 10:17

Believe in Jesus Christ - Hebrews 11:6

Repent of sins - Acts 17:30

Confess Christ as Lord - Romans 10:9,10

Be Baptized for remission of sins - Acts 2:38

Be Faithful unto death - Revelation 2:10